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Hemline Index: Is the Length of Skirts and Dresses Linked to the Economy?

You might have heard of the Lipstick Index, which suggests lipstick sales rise during economic downturns. Similarly, the Hemline Index proposes that skirts and dresses get shorter when the economy is doing well and longer during tough times. Read about it!



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Hemline Index is a theory, suggesting that dress lengths (hemlines) rise and fall with stock prices. (Photo: iStock)

Longer hemlines ruling celebrity styles and the runway, the tradwife aesthetic, and modest fashion—could these trends be tied to a weak stock market? In 1926, George Taylor, an economist at Wharton, is credited with the '**Hemline Index**,' a theory suggesting that dress lengths (hemlines) rise and fall with stock prices. According to the theory, skirt lengths get shorter in good economic times and longer in bad, such as after the 1929 Wall



Street Crash. The index claims that the length of women's skirts negatively correlates with the stock market.

In the 1920s, hemlines rose with the stock market before falling during the Great Depression. They climbed back up in the mid-1930s and stayed knee-length during the wartime boom of the 1940s. "When Dior released long, voluminous skirts in 1947, the trend seemed to foreshadow the recession of 1949. Then, once the market righted itself, a slow and steady rise began, introducing us to the minis of the '60s, which stuck around through the '80s millionaire boom. Eventually, midi lengths popped up when the stock market crashed in 1987," writes Marlen Komar in the article "Is the Hemline Index Actually Real?"

However, it's also suggested that Taylor didn't directly link skirt length with the economy. Taylor's PhD thesis in 1929, titled "Significant Post-War Changes in the Full-Fashioned Hosiery Industry," explored why the Hosiery industry experienced explosive growth in the 1920s. One factor he identified was skirt length, noting that as skirts got shorter, demand for nice hosiery increased.

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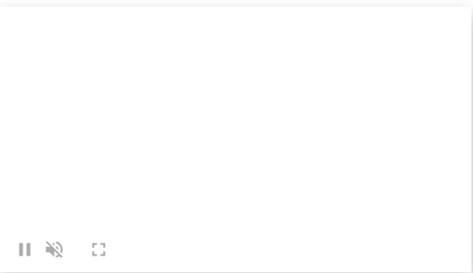
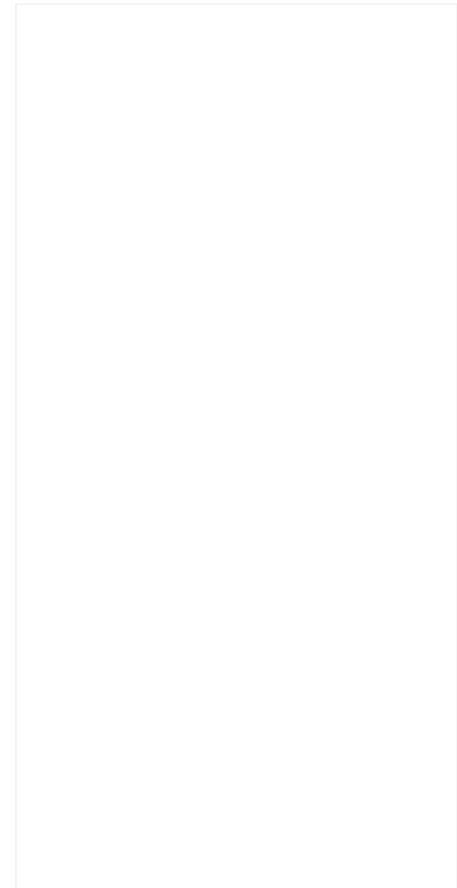
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There have been many studies on the validity of the Hemline Index and its correlation with predicting business cycles via popular culture. Philip Hans Franses, Professor of Applied Econometrics at Erasmus School of Economics, was asked about his research on the Hemline Index and the economy in an interview by De Morgen in 2023. Published on the website of Erasmus University Rotterdam, it states: "In order to test whether there is some validity to this theory, Franses and his then-student Marjolein Baardwijk performed a study using empirical tests after the French fashion magazine L'Officiel digitised their archives from 1921 onwards. The researchers coded all the fashion reports and compared them with economic cyclical data from the National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER). Their research showed that



the Hemline Index is an urban legend: a good story with no real-world value."

Still, the professor notes that you can tentatively conclude from the study that fashion follows the economy with about a three-year gap—that after a couple of years of economic prosperity, skirts got shorter, although even that effect was small. "In that respect, you could possibly argue that the long skirts we see now are the result of the dip we experienced during the COVID pandemic, but not that those skirt lengths predict a recession," the article states.

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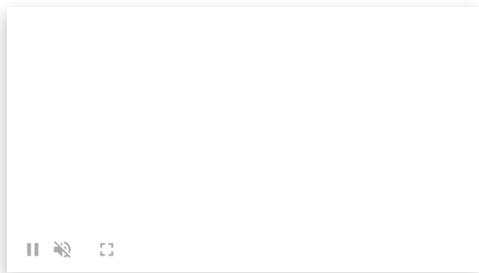
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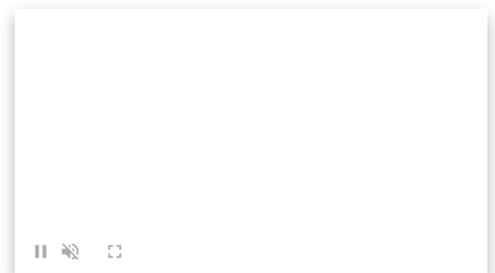
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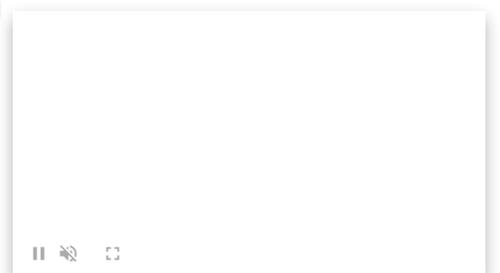
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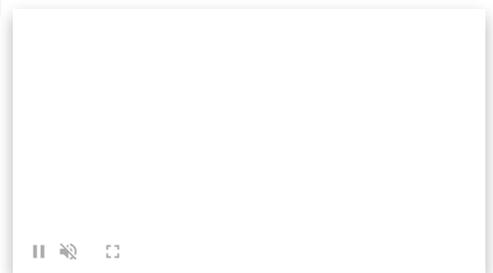
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